

Spinoza and Selfdestruction

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In 2003, Slavoj Žižek dedicated a chapter to Spinoza in his book on Deleuze: *Organs without Bodies: on Deleuze and consequences*, because Spinoza was a major influence on Deleuze's philosophy. Amongst other things, Žižek claims in this text that Spinoza missed or overlooked the fact that there exists not just a positive striving for self-perseverance in the world, there is also a destructive force from within, the force Freud pointed out as *thanatos* (θάνατος). Žižek states: "The next philosophical consequence is the thorough rejection of negativity (by Spinoza-CJ). Each entity strives towards its full actualization – every obstacle comes from outside. In short, since every entity endeavors to persist in its own being, nothing can be destroyed from within, for all change must come from without."¹

Although for Žižek this is a starting point to criticize Spinoza's political theory, I want to pause here and see if this claim holds. I will focus on the two questions concerning Spinoza's *conatus* that I deduct from Žižek's statement. 1) Is it true that Spinoza has a blind spot for the destructive force (from within) that Freud pointed out? and 2) Can you say that in Spinoza's system, especially from the way he explains the *conatus* "nothing can be destroyed from within and that all change must come from without?"

A thing strives for self-perseverance

In Spinoza's immanent system, there is only one substance, which Spinoza calls Nature, substance and God. These terms are interchangeable. Outside of this substance, nothing exists (EIP15).

Particular things as we encounter them in the world are affections of the one substance, and they are called modes (EID5). In modes, essence and existence are two distinct things:

Therefore, since God's intellect is the only cause of things (viz. as we have shown, both of their essence and of their existence), he must necessarily differ from them both as to his essence and as to his existence. For what is caused differs from its cause precisely in what it has from the cause. For example, a man is the cause of the existence of another man, but not of his essence, for the latter is an eternal truth. Hence, they can agree entirely according to their essence. But in existing they must differ. (EIP17 Schol)

So the essence of the modes is an eternal truth. And this eternal truth is the *conatus*, one of Nature's/God's/Substance's infinite properties.

EIIIP6: *Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being*

Dem: For singular things are modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by IP25C), that is (by IP34), things that express, in a certain and determinate way, God's power, by which God is and acts. And no thing has anything in itself by which it can be destroyed, or which takes its existence away (by P4). On the contrary, it is opposed to everything which can take its existence away (by P5). Therefore, as far as it can, and it lies in itself, it strives to persevere in its being, q.e.d.

EIIIP7: *The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.*

On first reading, this seems to agree with Žižek's remark that it is not possible to have a destructive force from within. Even more so from the preceding propositions 4 and 5: *No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause (EIIIP4) and things are of a contrary nature, that is, cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one can destroy the other (EIIIP5)*

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: on Deleuze and consequences*, 2003, Routledge, New York. p.35

However, it may be that Zizek overlooks something. When Spinoza speaks about a thing that can not have a contrary nature, what does he mean by *a thing* ?

EIID7: *By singular things I understand things that are finite and have a determinate existence. And if a number of individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing.*

EIIP13L7Scholl: *The human body is composed of a great many individuals of different natures, each of which is highly composite* (in the continuing points Spinoza elaborates further on this point. Also, as a result of Spinoza's concept of parallel expression: our mind is our idea of body, and this idea contains again many ideas)

Besides the fact that the latin word *res* has a broader meaning than the word 'thing' in our modern use of English, there is also a broadening of its meaning that is a direct consequence of Spinoza's ontology. 'A thing' seems to be a concept that can function at different levels. When a group of things act together as the cause of one effect, they are in fact *one thing* for Spinoza at that particular time. In modern terminology, the notion of a super-organism comes to mind. In current biology people are not in agreement if for example the ant or the hive should be seen as the organism. It seems that for Spinoza both the hive *and* the individual ant are modes with their specific *conatus*. One more complex than the other.

A cell in our body has its *conatus*, our body has its own *conatus*, and with a collective of humans in a harmonious state, the state also has a *conatus*. And Spinoza is very clear that the *conatus* can be found in every mode that exists, even in things that do not move (like a stone).

Within or without: a matter of perspective?

Spinoza himself explains to Henry Oldenburg in one of his letters (EP32) how to see this. In this letter he answers Oldenburg's question about the coherence of Nature. Spinoza uses the famous example of the tiny worm in the blood. This worm would have the perception that he and other individual entities are living within a certain universe, in competition for space. This worm would have no notion of "*how all these parts in the blood are controlled by the overall nature of the blood*"². In other words: the small cellular creatures in the blood can be seen as modes, so can the blood, so can the entire human body. However, the tiny worm has no notion of this all and believes himself to be in a universe of individuals fighting for their own perseverance.

For the human being the blood is a coherent, harmonious part of his body. For the worm, a battlefield of red and white blood-cells and T-killercells that want to eat him alive.

Many philosophers have written about the *conatus* in these changing constellations of different levels of complexity. These modes that consist of smaller individual modes seem to have (at the moment they exist and strive to persevere) a power that forces the individual smaller modes to act according to enable the perseverance of the mode. It is understood that *conatus* functions as a sort of constant power in life, and that the *conatus* in the words of Valtteri Viljanen "*'grabs hold of' the formation that corresponds with the individual's eternal essence. This is the moment when, for example, a human being is born and the striving to maintain her existence begins*"³.

So the *conatus* functions simultaneously at different levels at the same time, and the perspective you choose when defining the state of affairs seems to determine the outcome in a fundamental way. This idea that things function differently at different perspectives, and that our not being aware of this perspectiveness leads to prejudices about many things, also returns as a theme in another of Spinoza's letters. This time in the context of the prejudice of our idea that there is such a thing as free will. In another letter (Ep 58), Spinoza uses the example of a conscious stone that has received a certain amount of force from an external cause that makes it move (let's say someone throws it). The stone in this case, is unaware of this causal determination, not being able to see beyond its own life and will. He may even have come to the conclusion that he willed itself to move and that he may be

² Samuel Shirley (transl), et al, *Spinoza, The Letters*, 1995, Hackett Publishing Co, Indiana Ep 32, p193

³ Valtteri Viljanen, *Field Metaphysic, Power, and Individuation in Spinoza* in Canadian Journal of Philosophy 37.3 (2007) 393-418, p 413

contemplating to either stop or keep rolling. “*The stone thinks that it continues in motion for no other reason than that it so wishes*”⁴.

So following Spinoza’s reasoning, could one say that without or within is a matter of perspective?

If a cancer cell is so successful in its perseverance that it causes the human body to die, would Spinoza then say that at that moment the perspective should no longer be on the body as a whole but on the different cells competing for their perseverance, since the body’s *conatus* is no longer in place, or at least not strong enough to work as a harmonizing force/power? In that case the other cells are destroyed by the cancer cells. (which is destruction from outside.)

Or would he say that all illness is in fact caused by an outside agent, and that if we think cancer is an internal process, we still have not been able to point at the correct external factors that cause it?

Does the *conatus* of a society cease to exist the moment some of its individuals rebel successfully and at that point there is only a group of individuals left, each with their own *conatus*? Or should we look at where those opposing ideas came from, which would always point to a competing system with its own *conatus* that destroyed the society in the end from without?

Before trying to answer this, let’s take a closer look at the destructive force as an expression of negativity.

Freud and the destructive force

Since Zizek points to Freud as the person who showed us the existence of the destructive force, I wanted to take a closer look at what Freud actually said. In Freud’s description of the *Thanatos* it seems to be a force that stems from an urge to self-manifest. In his essay *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (translated as ‘Civilization and its discontents’) Freud says about this destructive force: “... even where it emerges without any sexual purpose, in the blindest fury of destructiveness, we cannot fail to recognize that the satisfaction of the instinct is accompanied by an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment, owing to its presenting the ego with a fulfillment of the latter’s old wishes for omnipotence.”⁵

In human culture, Freud sees the two driving forces as follows: Eros is the drive that tries to make larger unities, “civilization is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind. Why this has to happen, we do not know; the work of Eros is precisely this.” while at the same time *Thanatos* resists this drive through aggression.

This struggle between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction is exactly the evolution of civilization. “This struggle is what life essentially consists of, and the evolution of civilization may therefore be simply described as the struggle for life of the human species.”⁶

Is this a matter of a negative and a positive force? Or are these harmonizing force (striving for complexer entities) and destructive force (striving for maximum power for the individual, smaller self) like a pulsation of life, in a constant dance of assemblage and disintegration? Is it a matter of perspective to label this as negative or positive? Freud: “Just as a planet revolves around a central body as well as rotating on its own axis, so the human individual takes part in the course of development of mankind at the same time as he pursues his own path of life. But to our dull eyes the play of forces in the heavens seems fixed in a never-changing order; in the field of organic life we can still see how the forces contend with one another, and how the effects of the conflict are continually changing. So, also, the two urges, the one towards personal happiness and the other towards union with other human beings must struggle with each other in every individual; (...) The analogy between

⁴ Samuel Shirley (transl), et al, *Spinoza, The Letters*, 1995, Hackett Publishing Co, Indiana Ep 58, p284

⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, transl. James Strachey, 1962, Norton & Company, New York, p.68

⁶ *ibid*, p.69

the process of civilization and the path of individual development may be extended in an important respect. It can be asserted that the community, too, evolves a super-ego under whose influence cultural development proceeds.”⁷

Is Freud’s evolving super-ego on the scale of a civilization actually something like the *conatus* that grabs hold of a more complex entity, forcing the constituting individuals (*modes*) in it to cooperate? Could Freud’s driving forces be somewhat similar to the idea of the *conatus* as it functions on the different levels?

Neurologist Antonio Damasio thinks so. He claims that “Spinoza appears to have had an important influence on Freud. Freud’s system requires the self-preservation apparatus Spinoza proposed in his *conatus*, and makes abundant use of the idea that self-preserving actions are engaged non-consciously.”⁸ Damasio also quotes two of Freud’s letters in which Freud acknowledges to be influenced by Spinoza.

Freud’s destructive force can be explained in line with Spinoza’s metaphysics, as the *conatus* that manifests its power by the destruction of others (competitors for resources, for example). Freud warns us for taking a moral stance on this force, and explicitly points at our lack of vision, to see this from a wider perspective, the perspective of the species of humankind.

Spinoza the protobiologist

So did Spinoza miss, ignore or overlook the negativity as a force? The easy answer would be: that is the wrong perspective. The ideas of free will, contingency, as well as the idea of positive and negative forces in life are prejudices due to our failure to see things in their correct perspectives.

But this answer may not be satisfying. One could ask: the possibility of the destruction of other modes from our *conatus* can be easily deducted from Spinoza’s but he never mentions it. Does he not acknowledge it? In the *Ethics*, when Spinoza unfolds his immanent system, there is neither mentioning of positivity of the *conatus*. Never does Spinoza claim that the striving for self-perseverance is something harmonious. He only states that the *conatus* in modes is directed towards its wellbeing. And in the later parts, the part of *The Ethics* that deals with human ethics, he states that a rational human being would naturally tend towards cooperation and virtuous behavior, because this will eventually also make him prosper (and thus serve the self-perseveration). He warns the readers that reaching this completely virtuous behavior is to be understood as a model, because no human is capable of being a completely rational being.

And even so: this, again, is not so much a moral statement in the sense of what is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in the light of some eternal value or the eyes of a God with a will, but merely in terms of what is good or bad for the *conatus* of the mode. In EIVP18Schol(i) he states it thus: *that the foundation of virtue is this very striving to preserve one’s own being, and that happiness consists in a man’s being able to preserve his being*. We can learn by gaining knowledge that less destructive strategies towards others may be better for us in the long run. To use another biological metaphor: a mature thriving type III system in nature (such as a forest) also functions for a large part on symbiosis and cooperation.

This is a biological way of understanding Spinoza’s philosophy. And that is exactly what Antonio Damasio does in *Looking for Spinoza*. Damasio is fascinated by an alternative and according to him quite new reading of Spinoza: Spinoza as a protobiologist. Damasio’s idea is that this Spinoza has a lot of relevant things to say for scientists of our modern days, specifically for his idea of the body and the mind as the same substance under different attributes.

But there is more to Spinoza than the morally neutral protobiologist that Damasio presents us.

Spinoza’s perspective on human beings

The essence of a mode is its *conatus*. Every thing strives to persevere in its being. A lion will thrive when it is strong, swift, and makes enough kills. Plants will ‘choose’ strategies such as growing really

⁷ *ibid*, p 88

⁸ Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, 2003, Random House, London, p.260

fast to stay alive, or creating venomous poison to prevent animals from eating it. How does the *conatus* work in human beings?

A central term for human beings is the affect. Spinoza explains that affections are affections of the body ‘*by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections.*’ (EIIID3). Affects that we are the adequate cause of, Spinoza calls actions. Affects that we undergo, (and which we are not the adequate cause of) Spinoza calls passions. (EIIIP3). The central distinction is between joy: man’s passage to a greater perfection, and sadness: man’s passage to a lesser perfection. The third pivotal term is desire, which Spinoza understands as appetite together with the consciousness of it (EIIIP9S) or as *any of a man’s strivings, impulses, appetites and volitions, which vary as the man’s constitution varies, and which are not infrequently so opposed to one another that the man is pulled in different directions and knows where to turn.* (EIII Definitions of the affects, IExp.) In this same part, he even calls desire man’s very essence (insofar as it is conceived to be determined, from any given affection of it, to do something). Since the essence of any mode is the *conatus*, this combination of our affects with our appetites and our consciousness, are then aspects of the human *conatus*.

From here, Spinoza combines certain affects with desires and adequate or inadequate ideas and demonstrates how these can lead to certain emotions. For example: *repentance is sadness accompanied by the idea of oneself as a cause.*” (EIIIP51)

Spinoza defines all the affects of joy and sadness that we would label as negative in daily life as variations of sadness, so a diminishing of power: hate, aversion, fear, despair, remorse, pity, indignation, scorn, envy, humility, repentance, despondency, shame.

Interestingly enough, cruelty is a desire that Spinoza connects to joy: A desire by which someone is roused to do evil to one whom we love or pity. It is opposed by mercy, which is not a passion but a power of the mind, by which a man governs anger and vengeance.

Although Spinoza makes a consistent case for the reason we, by rationality and knowing more about God’s essence, would be logically driven towards cooperation and virtue, it seems to me a rather drastic turn from the Spinoza in the first parts of the ethics. This is the philosopher who warns against judging things from a narrow perspective, and who would say good and bad is a prejudice, since there are no such things as ‘pleasing to God’. As much as he claims this is nothing but a logical derivation through the system, it radiates not just a preference towards a cooperative model, but also an implicit anthropological stance on the nature of human beings. The human as a creature that in his most perfect, rational form would be capable of governing his inadequate appetites of violence, greed, and so forth, because he has seen that this will lead to the best results for humankind in the long run.

First of all: that is an anthropocentric perspective. Who says that from the perspective of Nature the cycle of assemblage and disintegration is not better served by enough violence between modes to keep this process more dynamic? Secondly: the way Spinoza presents virtues here somehow discloses his anthropology. How can Spinoza be sure that complete adequacy of ideas will lead to the set of virtues that he describes? It is as if Spinoza slips his own, human and personal hopes for a harmonious society where there is freedom of thought and speech, in through the backdoor of his morally neutral philosophy of *Natura Naturans* and *Natura Naturata*.

So if Žižek, when speaking about Spinoza rejecting negativity in his system, means that Spinoza denies the destructive aspect of the human *conatus* in his ethics proper (the part where he speaks about human virtues, and human freedom) as a driving force in human beings, I would agree with him.

Within or without ? Taking Spinoza literally.

I think we have to take Spinoza to the letter. A *conatus* cannot be corrupted from within, only when it weakens enough to let negative influences in, can it be destroyed. For Spinoza the force that diminishes the *conatus* has eventually to come from without.

It is like saying in modern terms that the body’s resistance determines if we get ill from a virus or not. Spinoza would say it is not the lack of resistance that kills us, but the virus. And maybe he would point

at the pressure on our bodily system from outside (stress, or polluted air or what not) as other external factors to undermine the *conatus*.

In the same part where Spinoza states how virtue is the logical result of our own nature, the striving to preserve our being, (EIVP18Schol), he makes an explicit remark about suicide. (...) *that happiness consists in a man's being able to preserve its being, (...) that those who kill themselves are weakminded and completely conquered by external causes contrary to their nature.*

Is Spinoza *wrong* to think things cannot be destroyed from within? I think this is partly a matter of semantics and definitions, closely related to the perspective we chose when describing things. And for the part about our body and mind being the same substance, and the implications this can have for the way we think about how our body reacts to the outside world and to our thoughts: I think Antonio Damasio is right when he says that this is a field where science is constantly discovering things. These new insights may not fit into our way of perceiving a gap between matter and thought. Damasio takes Spinoza's remark about depression as being cut off of from the *conatus* as a correct statement and translates it to modern neuroscience as follows: "*This certainly applies to the feelings reported in severe depression, and to their ultimate consequence in suicide. Depression can be seen as part of a 'sickness syndrome'. The endocrine and immunological systems participate in sustained depression, as if a pathogen such as a bacterium or virus invaded the organism, destined to cause disease.*"⁹ If Damasio is right, we could (have to) learn to look quite differently at what is physical and what is mental. And from there maybe also at what is an outside factor and what not.

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